DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 024 037 AL 001 592

By- Salisbury, Lee H.

Role Conflict in Native Communication.

Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages.
Pub Date Sep 68
Note- 6p.; Paper presented at the TESOL Convention, April 1967.
Available from- TESOL, Institute of Languages and Linguistics, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 20007 ($1.50).
Journal Cit- TESOL Quarterly; v2 n3 Sep 1968
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40
Descriptors- Acculturation, American Culture, *American Indians, Cultural Background, Cultural Differences, *Culture Conflict, English (Second Language), *Eskimos, Learning Processes, *Role Conflict, Sociolinguistics
Identifiers- College Orientation Program for Alaskan Natives, *COPAN

The author describes our prime educational aim in Alaska as an effort to help the native to become an autonomous, productive member of the larger society which he is entering. To a certain extent, this is the aim of all teachers who are teaching English as a second language. They are teaching the culture that the language expresses at the same time that they teach the code itself. The roles which education thrusts upon the teacher and the student present severe problems when the student i s a member of a cultural group considered by the teacher's cultural group to be primitive. It is very easy to regard any cultural group which has no written language, survives on a subsistence economy, and lives in virtual isolation as primitive, and hence, childlike. It is also easy to regard the process of learning English as the process of maturing from a childlike to an adult status. The Alaska native child within his culture is treated in a more adult fashion than children in our culture are, from a very early age. However, when he learns English from a teacher who not only regards him as a child, but regards his parents to be children as well, he cannot help but feel that the role of the child is strictly connected with the use of this language. The teacher should realize that each of his students has a unique contribution to make to the world: when each of his students come to recognize this himself, then the learning process has meaning. (AMM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

*Role Conflict in Native Communication**

Lee H. Salisbury

Those of us who are involved in native education in Alaska are in many ways more fortunate than many of you in this audience who may be concerned with teaching English to the Amerindian groups in the lower forty-eight states and Canada. I am afraid that our good fortune is not because we have pursued a more enlightened course of action with the native peoples in Alaska since the time of contact, but rather because the peoples with whom we work first met white people in quite a different way. One striking difference is the fact that Alaska was never invaded by white people anxious to exploit the land and resources as was the case in Canada and the lower forty-eight states. Alaska's native peoples do not regard themselves as a defeated race. No treaties were signed or broken. The native peoples of Alaska do not have a long, bitter, blood-stained history to look back upon and to brood about.

When the white man first came to Alaska it was in very small numbers, and the native people and their valuable knowledge of the terrain and survival techniques were highly valued by those who chose to remain in the North. The land, particularly in the northern part of our vast state, was valueless for pasture, timber, or grazing. The minerals that the white man dug from the ground did not interfere with the native's traditional subsistence pursuits. The inhospitability of the arctic environment had bred a race of people whose primary cultural aim was survival, and, being a pragmatic people, they accepted and adopted with great enthusiasm Western innovations such as the outboard motor, the automatic rifle, and the fish wheel, all of which provided more effective and economical means of subsistence. There is little feeling that acceptance of the white man's conveniences represented a dangerous erosion of their traditional culture.

As a consequence, the native culture, that of the northern Indians and Eskimos of Alaska, is today a kind of potpourri of traditional ways and Western conveniences. There are very few outposts in Alaska where the impact of the white man's technology is not immediately evident. The peoples of the northern interior area of Alaska were traditionally nomadic, following game and fish from season to season. Although the interior of Alaska is dotted with hundreds of small Indian and Eskimo villages, the majority of these settlements came into being as a result of the advent of the white man and his economy. Small villages were established up and down the waterways of Alaska to provide food and fuel for the riverboats which plied these waterways with miners and mining equipment. Ironically, many of these villages have far less contact with the white man's culture

* This paper was presented at the TESOL Convention in April, 1967.

Mr. Salisbury, Professor of Speech and Theatre Arts and Head of the Department of Speech, Drama, and Radio at the University of Alaska, has published articles in *Speech Teacher* and *Journal of American Indian Education.*

AL 001 592

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY James E. Alatis

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

today than they enjoyed a generation ago when gold mining and the river-boat traffic was at its height. As a consequence, many of these small communities which were rather far along the road to acculturation many years ago have slipped back into their traditional pattern now that the white man has disappeared.

The native today, in Alaska, faces tremendous problems in the cash economy society which has all but replaced the traditional subsistence economy of past years. An Alaskan economist recently estimated that if all of the present economic ventures in the northern part of Alaska come to fruition—these include mining and oil lease properties—that the total number of jobs made available by these ventures will amount to only 169 positions each year. When we consider that the Alaska native enters the labor force at a rate of 200 per year, that he constitutes 30% of the permanent population, and that his birthrate exceeds that of any other group in the world, it is painfully apparent that he must seek education and training to fit him for positions in the urban structure of Western society if he is to survive. Many of the students who come to our university from small native villages realize that education represents the only alternative to the despair and poverty and welfare checks which represent village life today. These students realize that in a very real sense they are learning new techniques of survival to fit them for the society in which they must find a place.

Unlike many of the Indian groups in Canada and the lower forty-eight states, the Indians and Eskimos of Alaska, for the most part, are not resentful of the acculturation process which this transition demands. They are, quite justifiably, unhappy when Western education as it is presently offered on the village level does not seem to equip their children for the world when they leave school. Many of the recently formed natives' rights associations in the state see education as one of the most important native social issues. Unlike many of the Indian groups in Canada, our native people do not consider the word *integration* to be a dirty word, perhaps because integration has never been forced upon them. They quite readily acknowledge that native students who are educated in urban Alaskan schools are more likely to succeed in Western terms.

Essentially, our prime educational aim in Alaska is to help the native to become an autonomous, productive member of the larger society which he is entering. I suppose this is to a certain extent the aim of all teachers who are teaching English as a second language. We are teaching them the culture that our language expresses at the same time that we teach the code itself. Looking at this problem as an anthropologist might, for a moment, we can regard all education, whether formal or informal, as a process of enculturation, the means by which the group teaches its young how to become productive, happy adult members of their own society. This enculturation process is tremendously challenging even among the young who are born into our Western cultural framework, because we live in an age where technological advances make yesterday's learning obsolete, but this problem is confounded when the group we try to teach about our culture

comes from another culture which does not share our Western conceptual base. Teaching in this context goes beyond teaching vocabulary and techniques, and must also include the conceptual framework upon which our language rests.

Education, whether formal or informal, has always been an adult responsibility. The older teach the younger members of the society how to become adults. It is unlikely that this tradition will ever change, but the roles which education thrusts upon the teacher and the student present severe problems when the student is a member of a cultural group which is considered by the teacher's cultural group to be primitive. It is very easy to regard any cultural group which has no written language, survives on a subsistence economy, and lives in virtual isolation as primitive, and hence, childlike. It is also easy to regard the process of learning English as the process of maturing from a childlike to an adult status. Ironically, many of the native people who know English rather imperfectly are regarded as adults in their own culture and as children in ours. This attitude, of course, is destructive and demeaning, and will postpone inevitably the acceptance of these people into our society as first-class citizens.

The Alaska native child within his culture is treated (from a very early age) in a more adult fashion than children in *our* culture are. His own thoughts and opinions are regarded to be inviolable and sacred. Indeed, there is more regard for the differences of an individual in their culture than there is in our own. However, when the native child learns English from a teacher who not only regards him as a child, but regards his parents to be children as well, he cannot help but feel that the role of the child is strictly connected with the use of this language. His parents have learned what they know of English in a dependency role. It is a code they have learned and used with people in authority: missionaries, teachers, construction foremen, etc., and until fairly recently, these people in authority have regarded their role to be parental. It is not surprising then when a VISTA worker comes into an Alaskan village hoping to establish an adult-to-adult communication relationship with a village member, for him to discover that the village adult finds this new role to be completely incomprehensible and rather threatening. Although the childlike role is demeaning, it can be comfortable in a welfare state. It makes few demands on the person.

Another problem which the teacher must deal with is the student's attitude toward the communication process, generally—whether speaking or writing. As we are all aware, there is no written tradition among the Alaskan Indians or Eskimos. The vast cultural heritage of these people has been transmitted by oral means, chiefly through stories and dances and games. Whereas a child in the Western culture is taught to behave in a socially acceptable fashion by admonition—"Thou shalt not . . ."—or verbal manipulation—by rewards and sometimes bribes—or by corporal means when all else fails, in the culture of the Alaska native these means of influencing behavior are unknown. A child is educated by example. He receives a cooperative orientation toward the life in his society. He watches his elders and

his neighbors carefully, and he learns from them. He is never consciously "taught." He learns the attitudes and values of his culture through stories which are often allegorical. In the Knife stories played with a stick in the damp mud of the Lower Kuskokwim River, a child learns that a very bad thing happened to a little girl at one time who didn't listen to her grandmother. Perhaps the most cruel punishment that can be inflicted upon any member of a tightly knit subsistence group by his peers is that of *ostracism*, of symbolically murdering the individual by refusing to recognize his existence for varying periods of time.

Oral communication is important for the maintenance of day to day transactions in village life, but it is not regarded as a means of manipulating the environment. Children in our culture quickly come to realize that their language is a means of influencing the behavior of others and making their way in the world. It is almost regarded by some people to be a means of defending oneself against a hostile environment. This attitude toward what our language is capable of doing contrasts sharply with the way in which the Alaska native uses his language. Conforming to social norms is important in any society, but conformity in the Alaska native environment is achieved through rather oblique means (when judged by our standards). We have proverbs and adages and epigrams, but they are likely to be direct statements of how a human being should or should not behave. The Alaska native in his cultural context would regard such proverbs to be rather aggressive and insulting.

Our society places a great premium upon the conflict of ideas. It is in the crucible of disagreement, we feel, that the truth is found. In the highly cooperative and closely knit Alaska native milieu, conflict is to be avoided at all costs. Aggressions are not manifested openly, but rather internalized. From the point of view of our modern psychologists, this internalization of conflicts, anxieties, and aggressions is destructive to the human personality, but it is a crucially important means of retaining the cohesiveness which the Alaska native culture demands. The greatest enemy in the north is not your neighbor but the cruel physical environment in which you live. It is more important to survive than to be right. Many lawyers and judges who are asked to enforce white man's law in native communities have found the concept of "individual truth" which the native possesses to be quite unique. For example, we place great credence in eyewitnesses to an antisocial act, and a person may be convicted of a crime on the testimony of an unimpeachable witness. The Alaska native, on the other hand, knows that each individual perceives truth in his own unique fashion. Hence, no two people can ever agree as to what really occurs in any given situation. This is somewhat frustrating to our legal establishment which must often regard certain acts to be either right or wrong. It is with considerable delight then that native students who read Hayakawa discover that the study of semantics embodies a philosophy which has been an integral part of their own cultures for thousands of years.

In fact, many of the newer, more revolutionary attitudes toward education are not as innovative as we think. Marshal McCluhan's revelation that many of the ills of modern education are caused by the conflict between the multi-directional education which the child receives up until the time he goes to school and the linear type of learning which is thrust upon him when he enters the classroom situation certainly applies to the Alaska native education scene. In many respects the native child who leaves a nonliterate culture and enters the Western educational track faces the same conflicts as does the TV-educated Western pre-schooler. He, too, has not learned things in a formal way. He, too, has been bombarded on all sides by experiences which he has learned to interpret and to make a part of himself. As one native student pointed out, "We have been educated in the McCluhan manner since the dawn of history. What's so great about written language anyhow?" We must admit that many of the world's people have survived just as long as we have without it.

We have learned many important concepts in our last four years' experience with entering native college students in the College Orientation Program for Alaskan natives (COPAN) which would certainly seem to apply to teaching generally. Education, if it is to be successful, cannot be regarded as a one-way process. The teacher and the student should not have sharply differentiated roles, because each can learn from the other. It is only when the student realizes that his contributions are valuable and unique that education becomes a meaningful and exhilarating process which continues far beyond the bounds of the classroom.

The final problem which each teacher of native students must recognize is that each of his students is seeking his own individual sense of identity. When the teacher ceases to regard himself as the dispenser of "truth" and places himself in the learning role, the student comes to view his own culture as a worthy one which has a status and importance among the cultures of the world. When he loses the feelings of inferiority which ignorant teachers all too unconsciously foster by ignoring his background, he can then *accept* himself and see himself not as a member of a particular race or cultural group, but as a unique individual with something special to offer the world around him. The Western world, then, does not represent the adult world, nor does his original culture represent the childlike, primitive world. Each society has its own unique set of values and traditions and he can choose the desirable elements from both cultures. Then he is not faced with the dilemma which confronts many members of the non-white races who are made to feel that they must choose whether they are to be white or native. Obviously, the choice is an artificial one, but it can seem a very real one to the native student who has come to feel that the culture of his parents is undesirable and inferior. When the Indian and Eskimo learns to speak English in an adult role—with the feelings of security and dignity which accompany it—he will be able to escape his present role of crippling dependency.

In summary, we can agree that the purpose of education, whether for-

mal or informal, is to help the individual to develop into a responsible, productive member of the particular society in which he chooses to live. We must also recognize that the role of the teacher, although historically construed to be that of the adult teaching the child, presents pitfalls when the student consciously or unconsciously concludes that the culture which the teacher represents is also the superior or "adult" one. When the teacher realizes that each of his students has a unique contribution to make to the world and *each of his students comes to recognize this himself*, then the learning process has meaning.